

INSTITUTE OF THE HISTORY OF MATERIAL CULTURE
OF THE RUSSIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

STATE HERMITAGE

ORIENTAL DEPARTMENT OF THE ST. PETERSBURG STATE UNIVERSITY



CENTRAL ASIA FROM THE ACHAEMENIDS TO THE TIMURIDS

ARCHAEOLOGY, HISTORY, ETHNOLOGY, CULTURE

Materials of an International Scientific Conference
dedicated to the Centenary of Aleksandr Markovich Belenitsky

St. Petersburg, November 2—5, 2004

St. Petersburg

2005

ИНСТИТУТ ИСТОРИИ МАТЕРИАЛЬНОЙ КУЛЬТУРЫ РАН
ГОСУДАРСТВЕННЫЙ ЭРМИТАЖ
ВОСТОЧНЫЙ ФАКУЛЬТЕТ
САНКТ-ПЕТЕРБУРГСКОГО ГОСУДАРСТВЕННОГО УНИВЕРСИТЕТА



ЦЕНТРАЛЬНАЯ АЗИЯ ОТ АХЕМЕНИДОВ ДО ТИМУРИДОВ

АРХЕОЛОГИЯ, ИСТОРИЯ, ЭТНОЛОГИЯ, КУЛЬТУРА

Материалы международной научной конференции, посвященной
100-летию со дня рождения Александра Марковича Беленицкого

Санкт-Петербург, 2—5 ноября 2004 года

Санкт-Петербург

2005

ББК 63.3
Ц38

*Издание осуществлено при финансовой поддержке
Российского гуманитарного научного фонда
Проект № 04-01-14024 г*

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Ц38 Центральная Азия от Ахеменидов до Тимуридов: археология, история, этнология, культура. Материалы международной научной конференции, посвященной 100-летию со дня рождения Александра Марковича Беленицкого (Санкт-Петербург, 2—5 ноября 2004 года). — СПб.: Институт истории материальной культуры РАН, 2005. — 406 с., ил.

ISBN 5-2010-1233-7

ББК 63.3

Корректор и редактор *Ю. Ю. Дмитриева*

Компьютерная обработка текста выполнена *В. П. Никоноровым*

Подписано в печать 03.12.2004. Формат 59×88 ¹/₈. Гарнитура основного текста «Times New Roman»
Печать офсетная. Бумага офсетная. Тираж 300 экз. Объем 50 усл. п. л. Заказ № 65.

Отпечатано в типографии Санкт-Петербургского Института истории РАН
197110, г. Санкт-Петербург, ул. Петрозаводская, д. 7
тел. (812) 2351586

ISBN 5-2010-1233-7



9 785201 012335

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CREATING AN EMPIRE: IRAN AND MIDDLE ASIA IN THE POLICY OF SELEUKOS I

Introduction. The early history of the Seleukids has inevitably tended to be studied from the Mediterranean and Babylonian perspectives, for the main sources relating are of Greek and Babylonian origin¹. Consequently, attempts can be observed which are not free of exaggerated focus on Syria or Babylonia². Such approaches, applicated in a number of studies, seem, however, to a large extent not to be sufficient for any coherent reconstruction of the Seleukid period, especially of its early developments.

In the phase reaching from 312 until 301 B.C., i. e. from the return to Babylonia to the battle of Ipsos, Seleukos was creating his empire. Initially, he had a slight chance of success. He had to make efforts to defende himself against the attacks of Nikanor, Demetrios, and Antigonos, and to extend as well as secure his rule in Babylonia and Iran. The position of Seleukos seemed desparate, and his overthrow a matter of time. Surprisingly, Seleukos not only defeated his powerful enemies, but he also managed to create a strong state with a formiddable military potential. How was it possible that Antigonos, being in the period 320 up to 301 the most successful and powerful of the Diadochs, and having his sights firmly set on uniting the former empire of Alexander, failed to eliminate Seleukos? And what were actually the decisive factors which contributed to Seleukos' rise to power? The following study attempts to reconstruct the policy of Seleukos (I) in the phase 312—301, focusing on the role of the Iranians. Evidence, from many angles, presents us with a period of rapid changes.

Seleukos in Babylonia and in the Upper Satrapies (312—301). After the battle of Gaza (312 BC), the hegemony of the Antigonids in Levant was temporarily shuttered. Seleukos, being supported by Ptolemaios, went to Babylonia with a tiny army of 1,000 soldiers. When Seleukos reached Babylonia, most of the inhabitants declared themselves on his side and promised support (Diod. 19, 91, 1). Actually, Seleukos was not a stranger there. At the conference of Triparadeisos in 320, he was appointed satrap of Babylonia, and remained in his office until 315. In Babylonia Seleukos had to face military dangers on two fronts: in the west, by Antigonos' troops, and in the east, by the army of Nikanor, Antigonos' appointee in Iran with the title strategos of the Upper Satrapies³.

After his surprising victory over Nikanor, Seleukos was able to make substantial territorial gains. Diodoros emphasizes that Seleukos demonstrated his magnanimity (*philantropia*) and easily won over Susiana, Media and «some of the adjacent lands» (Diod. 19, 92, 5). Seleukos, in fact, had to eliminate some centres of resistance in Media and to capture Nikanor himself. But his superiority in the Iranian satrapies remained vast, mainly due to the support of the local populations. In Persis, favourable to Seleukos, there was the hatred towards Antigonos felt by many of the Persian elite. The same is true in the case of Media. It seems that also the Parthians accepted — at least nominally — the rule of Seleukos.

After the long struggles with Antigonos and his son Demetrios, conducted mainly in Babylonia and west Iran (311—308), Seleukos prepared to launch a great expedition to east Iran and Middle Asia⁴. The political situation in east Iran and Middle Asia about 307, on the eve of Seleukos' eastern campaign, can be reconstructed only fragmentary. Parthia had been under Nikanor's control, and after his defeat this country must have been subjugated by Seleukos. Hyrcania probably formed one satrapy together with Parthia. In Areia/Drangiane, Antigonos was able to install satrap Euitos, and then Euagoras in 315, but it is improbable that Nikanor still controlled this remote region. Lands stretching to the east of Parthia and Areia/Drangiana, i. e. Margiana, Baktria, Sogdiana, and Arachosia remained beyond the realm of Nikanor. In 316—315, Antigonos failed to intervene in these countries and had to accept the status quo there. Diodoros, relating to the position of the satraps Tlepolemos in Karmania and Stasanor in Baktria, stresses that Antigonos was not able «to remove them by sending a message since they had conducted themselves well towards the indigenous inhabitants (*enchoroi*) and had many supporters» (Diod. 19, 48, 1). Both satraps conducted thus a

¹ On the beginnings of the Seleukos's state see: Wolski 1999: 19—27; Schober 1983: 94—193; Marasco 1984; Mehl 1986: 104—193; Sherwin-White, Kuhrt 1993: 7—39; Scharrer 2000.

² See, e. g. Seyrig 1970; Sherwin-White, Kuhrt 1993: 9: «A key to Seleucus' rise to power and to the future endurance of his kingdom was Babylonia, on which his territorial power was based».

³ On Nikanor's function see Diod. 19, 100, 3; App. Syr. 55/278; cf. Schober 1983: 89 f.

⁴ The literature on the eastern Anabasis of Seleukos is rich, but it mainly focuses on the Indian section of the campaign [see Schober 1983: 140—151 (Iran and Middle Asia), 151—193 (India); Mehl 1986: 134—137 and 166 f. (eastern Iran and Middle Asia), 156—193 (India)].

policy which aimed at gaining the support of the native Iranian populations. East Iran and Middle Asia became after 323—322, in fact, independent, the satraps there ruled as local dynasts.

In Bactria, Seleukos met a strong resistance, but the scanty sources are not specific. Justin (15, 4, 12.) maintains that Seleukos «Bactrianos expugnavit» and uses the term «Bactriani» to designate both the native Bactrians (2, 3, 6; 30, 4, 5) and Bactrian Greeks (41, 4, 5; 6, 3.). According to Orosius, «Bactrianos novis motibus adsurgentes perdomuit» (3, 23, 44)¹. Obviously, the Bactrian Greeks were not willing to accept Seleukos' suzerainty, thus it is probable that Seleukos had to fight the local Greek satrap. It is quite likely that a part of the native Bactrians supported Stasanor against Seleukos, as earlier against Antigonos. Thus, Seleukos' skilful policy, so effective in Babylonia and west Iran, proved to be a failure in Bactria. The Bactrian Greeks and parts of the native Bactrians tended obviously to establish their own independent realm. Seleukos' military threat forced the Bactrians to capitulation. But the feelings of autonomy and independence remained strong in Bactria: in about 60 years after Seleukos' anabasis, the Greeks of Bactria founded their own kingdom.

It seems that the Graeco-Macedonian presence in Sogdiana after Alexander's death was initially limited or almost annihilated by the pressure of the native Iranians and that of the nomads. It should be, however, remembered that the spouse of Seleukos, Apame, was daughter of the former Sogdian leader Spitamenes. This circumstance must have made easier for Seleukos to negotiate with the local lords and to gain their support. Nonetheless military actions were certainly made, and the Seleucid general Demodamas crossed the Syrdarya river, striking a blow to the nomadic tribes bordering the sedentary areas.

Seleukos' rule in the east reached Bactria, Sogdiana, Parthia (Parthyaia), Areia, Karmania and perhaps Drangiana. Arachosia, Paropamisadai, and Gedrosia remained Indian. After finishing his eastern campaign, Seleukos set out against Antigonos. Together with Ptolemaios, Kassandros, and Lysimachos he created a mighty coalition in 302.

Iranians in the battle of Ipsos (301). The main thing needed by Seleukos in 312—301 was an army able to fight against the mighty rivals. By 301, he could recruit just several thousands soldiers of Macedonian and Greek origin. The potential of Iran and Middle Asia was much bigger. Nikanor's army numbered 17,000 men, but Seleukos must have had much more for he was supported by Median and Persian elites. The potential of Persis in 318—317 under Peukestas numbered 14,000 soldiers, including 13,000 Iranians. The potential of the Kossaios can be estimated as 10,000 soldiers at least, of Media as 5,000 horse (the battle in Gabiene). Taking into account these rather lowered numbers, it can be assumed that already by 308 Seleukos could recruit at least 30,000 Iranians, including superior cavalry, excellent light infantry (archers and slingers), and pantodapoi (phalanx soldiers) from west Iran and possibly Parthia. After his conquest in east Iran and Middle Asia, Seleukos was able to enlarge his military forces on the basis of the new Iranian recruits. In consequence, when in 302 Seleukos appeared in Kappadokia, his army was for the most part Iranian, supported by a huge number of Indian elephants.

Seleukos joined Lysimachos and at Ipsos Antigonos fell before their combined power (301). Diodoros provides more details on Seleukos' troops (20, 113, 4): they numbered 20,000 foot, 12,000 horse, including mounted archers (*hippotoxotai*), 480 elephants, and more than 100 scythed chariots. Striking is the huge number of cavalry in Seleukos' army. King's son Antiochos commanded a mighty cavalry division. A picture of the battle itself can be gained mainly from Plutarch (*Demetr.* 29, 3 f.). The encounter began when Demetrios' cavalry charged Antiochos' troops and drove them back in flight. Having cut off Demetrios' cavalry from the main battle field, and «observing that his enemies' phalanx was unprotected by cavalry», Seleukos took his light horse-archers (*hippotoxotai*) and javelineers (*akontistai*) and kept Antigonos' phalanx in fear of a charge by continually riding around and harassing them. A large part of Antigonos' soldiers surrendered, the rest were mostly routed. Only few could escape joining Demetrios in his flight to Ephesos. Antigonos, abandoned by his friends and attendants, went down in a cloud of javelins.

At Ipsos, Seleukos employed tactics rarely used in the Hellenistic art of war. Against the phalanx he directed his light cavalry. But the point is that amongst them there were mounted archers and javelineers who could harass the enemy from a distance, and the phalanx was powerless in the face of such a tactics. The *hippotoxotai* played a particular role in the encounter. Their tactic was a devastating combination of speed and maneuverability coupled the most effective missile weapon of the day. Alexander the Great used them as an elite military force to strike a first blow and to harass the enemy during the Indian war. In such a function they were employed in the battle on the Hydaspes. The *hippotoxotai* were able to inflict heavy losses upon the enemy, but they remained in a safe distance from him. Alexander quickly estimated the value of the mounted archers from amongst the Dahae and Sakai after the experiences of the war in Sogdiana, in-

¹ I suppose that the Christian author must have drawn from reliable sources, perhaps even from Trogus.

cluding the Macedonian defeat on the Polytimetos. The tactics, based on the principle of defeating the phalanx by light cavalry forces, was successfully employed by Peithon in the wars between Antigonos and Eumenes.

From all this it follows that Seleukos' cavalry, forming two divisions: the one under Antiochos, the other under Seleukos, decided about the result of the battle. The cavalry was the main mobile offensive force. The role of the phalanx in the allied army was limited, it is not sure, whether it really fought in the battle. Important were to some extent the elephants, but they were used mainly as defensive force.

Amongst the *hippotoxotai* one can assume both the Dahae, the best soldiers of that type, and the Parthians. Additionally, Media, Sogdiana and Bactria had a huge manpower and it is very likely that large parts of Seleukos' cavalry forces came from those countries. As a whole, there can be no doubt that the Seleukos' army — including the infantry — was for the most part Iranian.

Attention should be paid to the role played by Antiochos in the battle. Commanding the cavalry division opposite to Demetrios' cavalry, he was undoubtedly put on the spot. The pretended flight of Antiochos and his cavalry was a manoeuvre typical of Middle Asian nomads, including the Dahae and Massagetae, living in the steppe areas on the borders of the Upper Satrapies. Such a manoeuvre required a high degree of training both from the horsemen and their commander. This, of course, leads to the logical conclusion that Antiochos must have gained practical and first-hand military experience before Ipsos, i. e. during the eastern campaign of Seleukos in Middle Asia.

Conclusion. In a number of contemporary studies, Babylonia is defined as the real mainstay of Seleukos' power in his attempts to create a state. It seems that such a concept do not stand up if the known events and relating sources are examined. True, in Babylonia Seleukos could count on the strong support of the indigenous population. But soon after his arrival at Babylon in 312, he had to leave the city to fight against Nikanor. After the surprising victory on the Tigris, Seleukos remained in west Iran and subjugated Susiana, Media, and Persis. Probably Parthyaia also recognized his suzerainty. What were real reasons for such a success? The main factor was indeed the attitude of the native Iranians towards the satraps and the Diadochs. In Media, the satrap Peithon was supported by the natives, like Peukestas in Persis and Seleukos in Babylonia till 315. All these satraps were removed from their posts by Antigonos. And in all these lands, especially in west Iran, Antigonos encountered a strong resistance of the natives. In Antigonos' policies, the native populations did not play any role. This attitude was the most important reason for Antigonos' failure in Iran and in Babylonia. This claim can be exemplified by the behaviour of Nikanor's Iranian soldiers — they did not forget Antigonos' offending treatment and went over to Seleukos¹. The Iranians were not enough strong to throw off the Macedonian supremacy. But they were able to choose and support the most suitable ruler who guaranteed them an extent autonomy and real influence in the system of rule. Thus, in 312/311 they gave aid to Seleukos. The difference between Seleukos' and Antigonos' attitude towards the Iranians can be showed in the treatment of the Kossaii. In 316/315, Antigonos was not willing to accept their autonomy and struggled through their country with heavy losses. Seleukos — on the contrary — gained the Kossaii apparently by a special agreement.

The known sequence of events leads to the conclusion that between 312 and 308 Seleukos was not in a position to rule effectively in Babylonia for the most part of this period. Babylonia was fully devastated by the invading armies, its economic potential was destroyed. The Babylonians did not appear as soldiers in the armies of the Hellenistic period. Decisive factor in Seleukos' efforts to establish his rule and to create a state proved to be the Iranians.

Having west Iran and Babylonia as his footholds, Seleukos was able to defend himself against Demetrios and Antigonos and to dislodge them from his satrapy. Having extended his potential with east Iran and Middle Asia, Seleukos was able to annihilate the power of the Antigonids — he played the decisive part in the battle of Ipsos. Seleukos' army at Ipsos was dominated by the Iranians, and it was the Iranian cavalry which gave victory to the king. The composition and structure of military forces determined the fundamentals of the empire created by Seleukos I in 312—301 BC for it was military power which really mattered in the Hellenistic world, especially in the Diadoch period. Thus, the Iranians played a decisive role in the establishment of Seleukos' empire.

¹ After Peithon's execution, his own supporters as well as supporters of Eumenes, Macedonians, Greeks and Iranians, joined their forces and fought together against Antigonos (Diod. 19, 47, 1—4).

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